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ABSTRACT

The question of responsibility for the eduction of disabled students has become a controversial issue. This article explores the debate between proponents of special education and of mainstreaming for academically handicapped children. Under Public Law 94-142, disabled children are guaranteed an appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment, as specified by an individualized education program. While this entitlement is widely supported, it entails significant administrative and budgetary problems. The Regular Education Initiative (REI), proposed by the Department of Education in 1986, is a strategy for unifying regular and special education. In question are the quality and value of special classes and "pull-out" programs for students with mild academic handicaps. REI proponents call for a fundamentally restructured mainstream that would provide a better education for all children at lower cost. The efficacy of supplementary resource room or learning center services is examined, especially in terms of reading instruction. Ramifications of handicap identification and classification, including implications for equal educational access, are also explored. Innovative programs, such as the Adaptive Learning Environments Model (ALEM) and Team Assisted Indiviualization (TAI), are described. Broadened regular education teacher training, increased special and regular education collaboration, and budgetary flexibility are suggested as key elements for change. (AF)

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The Mainstreaming Debate

"When our children do poorly in school," charges school board member Kay Jones, "we call them handicapped. We separate them from their classmates for part of each day, supposedly to provide for their special needs. But the law says these children have a right to learn in the least restrictive environment, and I've heard evidence that they do as well or better when taught by regular teachers in regular classrooms. We would save money and do a better job if we stopped labeling and separating children."

Forewarned of this criticism, the district's special education director responds that some students do need special settings—at least part of the time. Regular teachers lack the training to work with these students, and furthermore cannot give them the attention they need because of the size of their classes. The current configuration of services, she concludes, might need some adjustment, but on the whole is serving kids well.

A fictional scenario, but the stage has been set for it to occur in school districts across the country. The Education of All Handicapped Children Act (PL 94-142) has been in effect for over a decade. Hailed as a "handicapped children's Bill of Rights," this law guarantees children with any kind of disability the right to an appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment, as specified by an individualized education plan.

While this entitlement enjoys widespread support among parents, educators, and policymakers, specific federal and state program requirements sometimes confound and frustrate local administrators. And, at a time of severe budget constraints, the cost of special education is also an issue.

In 1986, Madeleine Will of the U.S. Department of Education proposed the Regular Education Initiative (REI), a strategy for unifying regular and special education. Proponents of the REI question the quality and value of special classes and pull-out programs for students with mild academic handicaps—including under this rubric many who are labeled learning disabled (LD), educably mentally retarded (EMR), or emotionally disturbed (ED). They call instead for a fundamentally restructured mainstream, adjusted to the needs of such students. Such a solution, they contend, would lead to better education for *all* children at lower cost.

While critics of the REI also see problems in the special education system, they do not think the evidence sufficient to warrant a major restructuring. Pointing to the vast number of students with handicaps who now receive educational services because of PL 94-142, they argue for more time to implement and study the effects of this law. "Adjusting" the mainstream, they warn, could prove more difficult and expensive than REI advocates imagine, saving money only by reducing the quality of services for children with handicaps.

Both proponents and critics of the REI see themselves as protecting and carrying forward the mission of PL 94-142. And both agree that the research offers no support for a retreat from mainstreaming as a general policy direction. But the question of how quickly and intensively to pursue mainstreaming is still at issue, with each camp claiming that the burden of proof rests with the other side. As the scenario unfolds at the local level, it is difficult to know

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whom or what to believe. Research —and one's interpretation of it—has become a weapon in the war of words.

Efficacy Studies

Since the 1950s a series of "efficacy" studies have compared outcomes for children with mild disabilities in a variety of special and regular settings. Evidence for the superiority of regular education is not as definitive as the fictitious school board member quoted above believes. In fact, the research is both flawed and inconclusive (see Box, "Research Says...").

Depending on which studies or research reviews one reads, it is possible to reach widely different conclusions. For example: (1) special classes are better for children's social and emotional adjustment, while regular classes lead to greater academic achievement; (2) when regular classes feature special strategies such as individualized instruction or cooperative learning, mildly handicapped students grow more on both socio-emotional and academic dimensions than their peers in special classes; (3) students closest in IQ to their "normal" peers are better off in mainstream settings, whereas those with lower IQ's learn better in special classes.

The dominant model in schools today is for mildly handicapped students to spend most of their time in regular classrooms, leaving to receive help from specialists, usually in a resource room or learning center. This "pull-out" model is justified as offering the best of both special and regular education. Students are substantially mainstreamed. At the same time, they receive intensive supplementary services from specially trained teachers.

In a 1983 review, Nancy Madden and Robert Slavin of Johns Hopkins pointed out that the research on the efficacy of such pull-out programs is even scantier than research comparing special to regular classes. They concluded, equivocally, that the results ultimately depend "largely on the quality of the resource program."

Problems with Pull-Outs

Recently, Mariana Haynes and Joseph Jenkins of the University of Washington examined one of the most common beliefs about resource rooms—that children with reading problems receive intensive reading instruction beyond what is available in the regular classroom. After observing in 23 resource rooms in an urban district and 5 in a nearby suburb, they arrived at some disturbing conclusions.

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The researchers found substantial variation in the amount of time students spend in resource rooms (from 11 to 180 minutes per day) and in the amount and type of reading instruction they receive. This in itself is not surprising, since students with different handicapping conditions at different levels of severity may have different needs. Yet the variation appears to be based more on school scheduling policies and instructional philosophies than on differences in student needs.

Furthermore, the picture of resource room instruction emerging from this study reveals that students spend a large proportion of their time working independently at their seats, receiving little feedback from the teacher and few explanations or demonstrations, and actually reading letters, words, or texts only 25 percent of the time. Overall, Haynes and Jenkins calculated that these students do not spend significantly more time being instructed in reading than students who remain in the regular classroom.

To determine how widespread these conditions are, and why they exist, more research will be needed. Meanwhile, reading specialists point to a related issue: resource rooms are not necessarily staffed by people with special training or expertise in reading. "The quality of teaching makes the greatest difference in overcoming reading problems," notes Jeanne Chall of Harvard University; "not where reading instruction takes place, or whether it is one-to-one, in small groups, or in a class." Yet in many states certification programs for special educators require, at most, only one course in reading.

Regular classroom teachers express their own reasons for ambivalence toward the pull-out model. Although many refer students to special education precisely so they can receive additional help, teachers also lament the "revolving door" to their classrooms, through which students leave for resource rooms, Chapter I tutorials, bilingual classes, and a variety of other programs.

A kind of fragmentation can result, with no one fully responsible for what children learn. Almost a third of the resource room teachers in the Haynes and Jenkins study believe they are the only ones teaching reading to the students. Yet the researchers observed that special education students actually read as much or more in their regular classrooms as in the resource room. This discrepancy indicates an absence of coordination in the reading instruction offered in those two settings.

Rather than the "best of both worlds," the pull-out model may be a compromise that does not provide

more intensive instruction, and that creates a host of new problems. The Haynes and Jenkins study does not, in itself, provide the grounds for eliminating resource room programs. But it does raise important warning flags. As a first step, educators in school districts with such programs should ask the following questions:

- Do children who attend resource rooms actually receive more and better reading instruction?
- Does the instruction come from teachers who are reading specialists?
- Does participation in the program in fact lead to significant gains in reading level?

Who Is "Handicapped"?

Fueling support for the REI is a heightening concern that too many students are being labeled as handicapped. While for the past five years the overall percentage of special education students has remained fairly constant (approximately 11 percent), there has been dramatic growth recently in the group classified as learning disabled, which now accounts for 44 percent of all students in special education.

Are all of these students "truly handicapped"? This is one of the most polarizing and confusing issues in the current debate. Behind this query are a number of concerns: that too much money is being spent on special education, that some low achievers are receiving services while others are not, that some students—particularly black males—are disproportionately placed in EMR classes, while white middle-class students are more likely to meet the criteria for the less stigmatizing LD label.

Investigating whether mildly handicapped students are different from other low-achieving students, a 1982 National Academy of Sciences report found "little empirical justification for categorical labeling that discriminates mildly mentally retarded children from others with academic difficulties." In a series of studies, James Ysseldyke of the Uni-

versity of Minnesota reached a similar conclusion for learning disabled students.

Others, like Daniel Reschley of Iowa State University, argue that there are differences—perhaps masked by current inadequacies in assessment—that have important implications for curriculum and instruction. Ann Brown and Joseph Campione of the University of Illinois have identified significant differences between mildly handicapped and average children in such areas as the efficiency with which they learn new information, their ability to connect new to prior knowledge, their strategies for processing information, and their ability to transfer knowledge appropriately to new situations.

Both sides in this debate are critical of the ways school districts classify students. They agree that there is considerable heterogeneity within each of the mildly handicapping conditions and that the distinctions among categories are not always clear.

The findings from a recent study of classification in five major metropolitan districts confirm these concerns. Judith Singer and her colleagues from Harvard University and Boston Children's Hospital concluded that where children live is a major factor in the classification they receive. They discovered a wide disparity among states and districts both in their definitions of disabilities and in the tests used to identify these disabilities.

Proponents and critics of the REI disagree, however, about how to improve on the present situation. Some call for eliminating the costly and time-consuming classification stage, pointing out that classification can cost as much as the added educational services and contributes little to the quality of instruction. Others, like Singer, call for increasing the uniformity and fairness of current procedures, but caution against any drastic restructuring.

The disagreement is not over whether a significant number of students evidence serious learning problems. Both sides agree that there are many such students in our schools. Rather, the issue is whether classifying some students as handicapped will help or hinder efforts to educate them. Certainly school policymakers must be prepared to address a critical question raised by Singer: If the categories are eliminated, how can resources be protected and set aside to ensure that students with special needs receive services?

A Strange Logic

Critics of the REI point out that it is a strange logic to call for the regular system to take over educational responsibility for pupils with whom it has already demonstrably failed. Proponents counter that educators now know a great deal more than before about how to instruct low-achieving, disadvantaged, and mildly handicapped students.

Teachers who are effective with such students communicate high expectations, provide direct instruction, reinforce on-task behavior, praise students often, and rarely use criticism. In addition, they are able to adapt their instruction to allow for individual learning rates and to provide a variety of learning options to accommodate student differences.

While not all teachers match this profile, many use at least some of these methods. According to a recent study, however, teachers' attitudes must also be taken into account. Russell Gersten of the University of Oregon and his colleagues found that teachers whom supervisors rate as having the strongest repertoire of effective teaching techniques are the very ones who report the least tolerance for the academic and behavioral problems characteristic of mildly handicapped students. These teachers also express the most resistance to having such students placed in their classes.

This may not be evidence of irrational prejudice on the part of these teachers. With up to 30 children in a classroom, they may, indeed, be attempting to guard against the inefficient use of their instructional time, which could keep them from covering the required curriculum and lead to an overall decrease in the level of student performance. At a time when effectiveness is measured by higher average scores on standardized tests, it is not surprising for regular classroom teachers to fear an even greater variability among their students.

New Experiments

Clearly, a school or district decision to move toward full-time mainstreaming of mildly handicapped learners must be accompanied by a commitment to examine and change the regular education program. A number of districts across the country are experimenting with new strategies for serving a broad range of students within regular classrooms.

Resource rooms are not necessarily staffed by people with special training or expertise in reading.

Perhaps the most comprehensive strategy is the Adaptive Learning Environments Model (ALEM), developed by Margaret Wang of Temple University, a strong advocate of the REI. This model incorporates a number of techniques deriving from mastery learning and cooperative learning research—including, for example, direct instruction, student self-management and self-monitoring, and peer assistance.

In an ALEM classroom, students spend part of each day working on highly structured curricula to develop their academic skills, receiving instruction from regular and special education teachers. At other times students participate in open-ended and collaborative projects, based on interests as well as needs. Wang emphasizes that ALEM is more than the sum of its parts; it is a unique management system for dealing with diversity.

Drawing from their research on cooperative learning (*HEL*, January 1986), Robert Slavin and his colleagues at Johns Hopkins have devel-

oped their own program for improving the outcomes of mainstreaming: Team Assisted Individualization (TAI). Encouraged to work together by a team reward system, students learn to check, record, and monitor one another's work on individualized mathematics packets. The teacher is thus freed to spend more time instructing students in small groups.

Rather than adopt a specific mainstreaming program, some schools are trying various forms of teacher consultation. The emphasis can be prereferral intervention, with special and regular educators working together to improve a student's class performance *prior* to referral to special education. Another approach is for special education personnel to assist teachers in modifying their curriculum to meet the needs of mainstreamed students.

While many programs report positive results, evidence for the effectiveness of these models exists mainly in the form of program evaluations that do not include comparative data or control groups. Even where carefully designed studies have been done, researchers caution about generalizing from the findings. These programs are usually compared to regular classes where no special approaches are in place; little is known about how the various approaches measure up against one another. It is also not yet clear whether students will maintain gains over time.

In describing the REI, skeptics use metaphors like a lion lying down with a lamb, or an unhappy and arranged marriage (in which regular educators would be the bride). School board members like Kay Jones prefer the image offered by REI proponents, of a partnership or reunited family of educators providing better education at lower cost.

Can real educators working with real students in real schools achieve this ideal? There is much more to learn about the best configuration of services and how much these services will cost. One thing that can be said with certainty is that in the second decade of PL 94-142 it is important for schools to try new things and to collaborate with universities in studying these efforts.

Although current experiments fall short of providing a formula for how to proceed, the innovative programs described above share a number of key elements, which suggest an initial strategy:

- training for regular education teachers to help them broaden their repertoire of techniques for working with a wide range of students;
- opportunities for frequent and regular collaboration between special and regular education teachers; and
- flexibility in the budgetary process, allowing administrators to draw funds from both regular and special education to support added resources for mainstreaming.

For Further Information

The *Journal of Learning Disabilities* has presented the debate about the REI in two recent issues: articles by advocates of the REI appear in vol. 20, no. 5 (May 1987); articles critical of the REI in vol. 21, no. 1 (Jan. 1988).

The Collaborative Study of Children with Special Needs is a five-year comprehensive look at special education programs in five major urban school districts, conducted by a team of researchers from Harvard University and Boston Children's Hospital. For an overview, see J. Singer and J. Butler, "The Education of All Handicapped Children Act: Schools as Agents of Social Reform," *Harvard Educational Review* 57, no. 2 (May 1987).

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